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A bridge too far? Ukraine's operation to isolate Crimea

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Over the past three months, Ukraine has intensified its attacks on the Russian army's operational rear on Crimea. The targets have included logistics hubs, road, rail and maritime infrastructure, troop concentrations, air defence systems, ammunition depots and command posts. The operation aims to cut the peninsula off from military reinforcements and fuel supplies, while also damaging energy infrastructure and transport links used to supply the civilian population. The scale of the disruption prompted the occupation authorities on Crimea to declare a state of emergency in late June, which remains in force. Medium-range unmanned aerial vehicles have played a particularly important role in these attacks.

Despite the substantial damage inflicted by Ukrainian strikes, they have so far had no significant impact on the pace of the Russian army's advance at the front. Russian forces retain the initiative and continue to exert pressure along most sections of Ukraine's defensive line, including in the southern sector. Russian troops in Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts are supplied largely through Crimea. A possible destruction of the Crimean Bridge could alter the situation on the peninsula. However, Ukraine's ability to achieve this objective is constrained by the limited technical capabilities of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) and the potential consequences of such an operation.

Medium range, multiple roles

Ukraine's growing use of medium-range UAVs, capable of operating at distances of approximately 30–300 km, has enabled it to conduct drone strikes on Crimea. The UAVs have partly supplemented and replaced Western artillery systems, particularly HIMARS, whose introduction in the summer of 2022 played an important role in destroying Russia's military rear infrastructure. However, as drones became increasingly widespread both on the front line and behind it, these artillery systems grew more vulnerable to Russian UAV attacks. Their use consequently declined, a trend also driven by periodic shortfalls in ammunition supplies from Western partners. This was one of the factors that spurred increased production of medium-range unmanned systems. Their development has also been driven by their role in creating 'corridors' for Ukrainian missile and drone strikes deep into Russian territory by destroying radar stations and air defence systems.

Several Ukrainian units had been developing the use of medium-range drones independently since 2023, but their wider adoption is linked to Robert Brovdi's appointment as commander of the Unmanned Systems Forces (USF) in June 2025. His decision to expand the so-called 'kill zone' along the front line to include the operational rear of Russian forces paved the way for the increasingly intensive use of these drones (see *Game of drones: the production and*

use of Ukrainian battlefield unmanned aerial vehicles).

Mykhailo Fedorov, then minister of digital transformation, also advocated this approach. From 2025, he unsuccessfully sought to persuade the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine to embrace the mass deployment of UAVs with a range of more than 30 km. It was only after he took over the defence ministry in January 2026 that these plans could be implemented on a broader scale. Another important factor has been the use of Starlink terminals for precise UAV guidance. This has made the drones more resilient to the loss of line-of-sight radio communications and to jamming by Russian electronic warfare (EW) systems.

De-escalation through escalation

The campaign of large-scale strikes on Crimea was launched as part of Operation Logistics Lockdown, announced by Defence Minister Fedorov in late May this year. It targets the Russian army's immediate rear with the aim of undermining its ability to conduct offensive operations. Fedorov had secured President Volodymyr Zelensky's approval for the plan in April. Zelensky subsequently made medium-range drone production a priority for Ukraine's defence industry and announced a fivefold increase in orders for the Armed Forces of Ukraine in 2026, to 5 billion hryvnias (around $112 million).

Since early June, the Unmanned Systems Forces have expanded the operation by seeking to isolate Crimea from transport links. The use of medium-range drones is intended to disrupt supply routes to Russian forces operating in Kherson oblast. Strikes on energy and industrial facilities are designed to disrupt air defence operations and exacerbate the region's economic problems by triggering supply and energy crises on the peninsula. Combined with intensified attacks deep inside Russia, these operations are also intended to significantly worsen public sentiment in Russia. The aim is to convince the Kremlin that the cost of continuing the war is too high and compel it to enter peace talks on terms favourable to Kyiv.

Drone blockade of Crimea

Crimea's geography makes it easier to impose a transport blockade on the peninsula. It is connected to the occupied areas of southern Ukraine by a narrow land corridor across the Isthmus of Perekop. Since early June, Ukrainian drones have systematically targeted this area, disrupting transport links in northern Crimea. The strikes have damaged a road bridge over the Henichesk Strait and railway bridges over the Syvash near Chonhar and over the North Crimean Canal.

Ukraine has also targeted railway lines between central Crimea and the Kerch Peninsula, as well as infrastructure around Kerch, including the ferry crossing and an oil terminal. The port of Kavkaz, on the Russian side of the Kerch Strait, has also come under attack, with strikes damaging quay infrastructure and vehicle ferries. According to estimates by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), more than half of the approximately 700 Ukrainian military strikes on Crimea since the start of the full-scale war have taken place in the past six months. Around 20% occurred in June alone.

At the same time, Ukrainian forces have intensified attacks on Russia's overland transport links with Crimea, including the so-called Novorossiya route from Rostov-on-Don via Mariupol to Simferopol. The destruction of road fuel tankers has significantly disrupted

traffic along the route, with the number of vehicles using it reportedly falling by 71% in June. Fuel rationing for civilian use has also been introduced on the peninsula. Ukraine has stepped up strikes on critical infrastructure, including power plants in Sevastopol and combined heat and power plants. Following power cuts lasting several hours, the occupation authorities declared a state of emergency on Crimea in late June. In mid-July, around 1.4 million consumers, equivalent to more than 50% of the peninsula's population, lost access to electricity at the same time. The blackout reportedly also disrupted water supplies, forcing some residents to leave the peninsula.

The consequences of the attacks have posed a significant logistical and reputational challenge for the Kremlin, including through periodic shortages of electricity and consumer goods. In late June, Vladimir Putin acknowledged that Ukrainian strikes were inflicting substantial losses. The Kremlin has nevertheless avoided referring to their impact on Russia's military capabilities, instead claiming that civilian infrastructure is their main target. In doing so, it seeks to portray Ukrainian military operations as terrorist acts, sustain public support in Russia for the war effort and convince the population that there is no alternative to continuing the war.

Targeting the Crimean Bridge

The Unmanned Systems Forces' drone strikes on Crimea demonstrate the ability of Ukraine's armed forces and defence industry to inflict significant losses on Russian forces. The operation has succeeded in disrupting Russian operations to some extent, primarily by forcing Russia to relocate equipment and ammunition depots, lengthen supply chains and increase the cost of supplying its forces.

Despite these achievements, a complete blockade of the peninsula remains unlikely. Russia has reduced the effectiveness of Ukrainian attacks by deploying more air defence units and systems and establishing temporary crossings. At the same time, Ukraine's advantage is diminishing as Russia continues to adapt its technology and tactics, including its use of unmanned systems and electronic warfare capabilities. If Russia succeeds in restoring its air defence cover, it is likely to intercept a greater proportion of Ukrainian drones. The campaign began to lose momentum in August. This trend is already apparent following the depletion of most stocks of drones used for so-called 'middle strikes'.

The destruction or permanent disabling of the Crimean Bridge could be the decisive factor in triggering a serious supply crisis on the peninsula. The commander of the Unmanned Systems Forces has claimed that the bridge has deliberately been left intact to allow Russians to leave Crimea. In reality, however, destroying it would be extremely difficult and costly. Previous attempts have demonstrated that Russia can protect the bridge effectively and is prepared to devote substantial resources to restoring it quickly. Ukrainian forces would therefore need not only to inflict severe damage on the structure but also to prevent Russia from restoring the bridge's capacity.

Inflicting significant damage on the bridge would require a substantial number of high-value missiles, such as Storm Shadow and ATACMS. Given the shortage of these weapons, the Armed Forces of Ukraine have chosen to use them against other targets, including critical military infrastructure. Moreover, targeting the bridge currently offers little operational benefit, aside from its symbolic impact, as alternative supply routes remain available, including the so-called Novorossiya route.